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ABSTRACT

Improving the economic condition of the Negro was a fundamental concern of both W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington. It was Washington's view that the Negro should be willing to perform menial tasks as a means for gaining a foothold in the economic structure. He counseled the Negro to start at the bottom. Washington's philosophy centered on education, patience, and then eventual advancement. The distinction between DuBois and Washington on education was one of degree. Washington minimized the importance of a college education while duBois called for a group of well-educated black leaders to work in Negro communities for the advancement of the others in the community. As an issue, education to advance the Negro economically indicates a similarity between the two speakers. The basis for the debate is clearer on the issue of social status. Washington did not deal with most of the inequities and instead tended to assure the white Southerner that the Negro did not want social integration. DuBois openly discussed the problem and regarded it as fundamental to the rights of man. The debate suggests several important implications for the study of minority rhetoric. It would appear that if a black leader wishes to be supported by whites, his viewpoints must avoid direct threats and demands. (WR)

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THE BLACK LEADER'S RHETORICAL DILEMMA: AN ANALYSIS OF THE DEBATE BETWEEN W. E. B. DUBOIS AND BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

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The Black Leader's Rhetorical Dilemma: An Analysis of the Debate Between W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington

Thomas E. Harris

The early part of the twentieth century witnessed "the great debate . . . between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois over the proper goals and strategy for Negro activity."[1] The first member of the debate, Washington, rose to national fame largely as a result of his Atlanta Exposition Address in 1895.[2] He was more than a leader of his own race, "he was also a leader of white opinion with a national following."[3] Even DuBois, in his classic critique of Washington admitted, "easily the most striking thing in the history of the American Negro since 1876 is the ascendency of Mr. Booker T. Washington."[4] Largely as a result of this critique, DuBois became the leader of the opposition to Washington's methods for black advancement.[5] Of all of Washington's critics, "the most eloquent [voice] was that of DuBois."[6] He was regarded by some as "the Columbus of the Negro's new world."[7]

Because of his approach, "Washington became the symbol of the philosophy of patience and gradualism."[8] DuBois advocated instead that "Negroes should challenge both the pattern of segregation and the restriction of Negroes to the lower levels of the occupational scale."[9] Washington appeared to be willing to achieve eventual advancement while DuBois wanted to agitate for immediate improvement.

In light of the importance of these two leaders it is useful to examine the positions taken by each speaker in response to the economic, social and political conditions facing the Negro. Then this study will consider some implications suggested by the success of each

speaker for the study of minority rhetoric.

Historical Context

The post-reconstruction era was in most aspects a period of retrogression for the Negro. He was geographically isolated, and politically, socially and economically regressing from the hopeful advances of the reconstruction era. "The post-reconstruction years," John Hope Franklin observed, "witnessed a steady deterioration in the status of Negro Americans."[10]

Nearly 90 percent of America's ten million Negroes were in the South.[11] The people in the North, many of whom had never entertained the notion of social equality, were "for the most part in substantial agreement that the South should be allowed to deal with the /Negro/ problem in its own way."[12] In fact, public opinion in the North had become increasingly anti-black during the post-reconstruction era, the majority believing "that Negroes were an inferior race, unfitted for the franchise, and that white domination was justified."[13]

In the South, the status of black people was in a state of rapid deterioration that began with the election of 1876. Politically, "through violence, fraud and complicated voting procedures, Negro political influence was effectively curtailed . . . ."[14] Socially, "the walls of segregation and caste were raised higher and higher by laws and custom."[15] Economically, "blacks were relegated almost entirely to menial occupations and unskilled labor. . . . In some instances, their conditions descended almost to a state of peonage."[16] Both DuBois and Washington spoke frequently about the economic, social and political conditions facing the Negro.

The Speakers' Positions

Improving the economic condition of the Negro was a fundamental concern of both speakers. Each viewed education as a means for obtaining economic advancement.

The Negro, in Washington's view, should be willing to perform menial tasks as a means for gaining a foothold in the economic structure. He counseled the Negro to start at the bottom. "Our greatest danger is that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us live by the productions of our hands, and fail to keep in mind that we shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify in common labor. . . . It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top."[17] Essentially, the Negro should prove his worth economically to justify advancement. The Negro would be free ". . . by laying the foundations carefully, patiently, in the ownership of the soil, the exercise of habits of economy, the saving of money, the securing of the most complete education of hand and head, and the cultivation of the Christian virtues."[18] Washington's philosophy centered on education, patience, and then eventual advancement. He supported the use of industrial training to teach the Negro manual skills and viewed higher education as impractical and unsuccessful for economic advancement.[19] "By teaching the crafts he hoped to encourage the Negro to recoup to some extent his position of post-emancipation days."[20] The political and social disadvantages would be solved, he reasoned, if the Negro proved himself economically.[21]

The distinction between DuBois and Washington on the issue of education was one of degree, not kind. As DuBois explained: "These

two theories of Negro progress were not absolutely contradictory. I recognized the importance of the Negro gaining a foothold in trades and his encouragement in industrial and common labor. Mr. Washington was not absolutely opposed to college training, . . . but he did minimize its importance, and discouraged the philantropic support for higher education, while I openly and repeatedly criticized what seemed to me the poor work and small accomplishment of the Negro industrial school."[22] DuBois called for a group of well-educated black leaders, approximately 10 percent of the race, to work in Negro communities for the advancement of the other 90 percent. As he explained, "I believed in the higher education of a Talented Tenth who through their knowledge of modern culture could guide the American Negro into a higher civilization. I knew that without this the Negro would have to accept white leadership, and that such leadership would not always be trusted to guide this group into self-realization and to its highest cultural possibilities."[23] Most Negroes would still receive some type of industrial training for he did not advocate a universal college education. "Not all men--indeed, not the majority of men, only the exceptional few among American Negroes or among any other people--are adapted to this higher training."[24] The "Talented Tenth" would return to the Negro communities and help advance the entire race.[25]

As an issue education to advance the Negro economically indicates a similarity between the two speakers. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the social and political viewpoints to develop the issues in the debate.

Washington made his views well known on social separation. He

believed the Negro, in gaining his equal rights, should be patient and prove himself. Washington assured the South that "in all things purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress."[26] As he further explained: "The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than artificial forcing."[27] Washington apparently was prepared to postpone the gaining of social equality and place the burden for advancement on the Negro. He probably reasoned that Southern cooperation for Negro progress would be more likely if he quelled fears concerning the "bug-bear" of social equality.[28]

DuBois, on the other hand, did not accept discrimination on the basis of color. He was very straightforward concerning the problem. "Our general knowledge may thus be summarized: there is a system of color caste in the United States based on legal and customary race distinctions and discriminations having to do with separation in travel, in schools in public accommodations, in residence and in family relations. There is discrimination in the kind and amount of public school education and in civil rights of various sorts and in courts, jails and fines."[29] Problems such as "Jim Crow" cars were frankly criticized by DuBois.[30]

It should be emphasized that DuBois did not call for racial assimilation. He wanted blacks and whites to be able to use the same facilities. As he stated: "For this reason, the advance guard of the Negro people--the eight million of Negro blood in the United States of

America--must soon come to realize that if they are to take their just place in the van of pan-Negroism, then their destiny is not the absorption of the white Americans. . . . [The Negro's] destiny is not a servile imitation of Anglo-saxon culture, but a stalwart originality which shall unswervingly follow Negro ideas."[31] DuBois wanted every man to have equal opportunity in social interaction.

The basis for the debate is clearer on the issue of social status. Washington did not deal with most of the inequities and instead tended to assure the white Southerner that the Negro did not want social integration. DuBois openly discussed the problem and regarded it as fundamental to the rights of man.

The quest for political rights and privileges provides the final area for analysis. Washington deprecated protest and preached a conservative approach to political progress. He argued: "An inch of progress is worth more than a yard of complaint."[32] Negroes should earn their basic rights. "It is very important and right that all privileges of law be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercise of these privileges."[33] Washington believed that the right to vote would be granted to the successful Negro farmer and businessman.

DuBois was more open in his reaction to the political question. He concluded: "There is disfranchisement of voters by various tests, including restrictions as to registration and as to voting in primaries; and including the rights of summary administrative decisions; and finally there is lynching and mob violence."[34] However, DuBois did not accept political disfranchisement. "I maintain that political

power is the beginning of all permanent reform and the only hope for maintaining gains . . . no permanent improvement in the economic and social condition of Negroes is going to be made so long as they are deprived of political power to support and defend it."[35] The political issue placed a clear division between Washington and DuBois. The former was willing to postpone the franchise while the latter was not.

An interesting facet of the debate was the reaction of the leaders to the methods used to prevent the Negro from voting. Washington rarely spoke on issues such as lynchings and when he did, he did not condemn the people involved but instead indicated it was not in their self-interests to engage in such activity. "The age for settling great questions," he argued, "either social or national, with the shotgun, the torch, and by lynchings has passed. An appeal to such methods is unworthy of either race."[36] Washington felt that "all the barbarities of the mob should be met with 'few words and conservative action;' it was wise to 'suffer in silence' and exercise 'patience, forebearance, and self-control in the midst of trying conditions.'"[37] In Washington's view, lynching was simply not an effective deterrent to crime and therefore should not be used. "I believe that, for the most part, we are agreed that that kind of punishment has not, in most cases, rid our country of that kind of crime."[38]

DuBois, on the other hand, was openly critical. "You have created here in the United States, which today pretends to the moral leadership of the world, a situation where on the last night of the old year you can slowly and publicly burn a human being alive for the

amusement of Americans who represent the purest strains of Nordic blood in that great place, Mississippi, which has done so much for the civilization of the world!"[39] In talking to one audience DuBois strongly generalized: "You allow lynching and murder to become a national pastime."[40] As was characteristic of many of the issues that divided the two men, Washington tended to understate or remain silent while DuBois did not. The basic distinction between the two is that Washington regarded the Negro's political disfranchisement as an issue that would eventually be rectified while DuBois regarded the vote as fundamental to Negro progress.

In summary, it is evident that both speakers were interested in black progress. Although their stances might have been different the ultimate goals were apparently the same. Washington emphasized the learning of industrial skills to gain a foothold in the American economic structure. Eventually, he wanted the whites to become dependent on the Negro worker.[41] He deprecated agitation for social equality and political franchise. In fact, he rarely mentioned equality and when he did it was to assure the whites that the Negro would be patient and was willing to start at the bottom of the economic ladder and prove himself. He denounced violence against Negroes as an ineffective law enforcement tool.

DuBois also saw education as a means for Negro advancement, but he advocated a college educated "talented tenth" to lead the Negro race. He did not want racial assimilation but openly criticized the lack of equal facility use by blacks and whites. To DuBois, the political

franchise was essential to Negro progress. This issue provides the clearest division between speakers, for Washington wanted the Negro to earn the right to vote through economic advancement.

Implications

Although both speakers won wide support for their ideas,[42] they did not enjoy equal power or success. "In this day of intense competition for Negro leadership, it is hard to imagine the total monopoly Booker T. Washington enjoyed for almost a third of a century."[43] Apparently, Washington gained success "because he told the white Southerners and Northerners what they wanted to hear."[44] The immediate effect of his speaking was to gain a great deal of funding for Negro education and personal fame. However, Washington tended to acquiesce concerning segregation "which racists mistook for active endorsement. More specifically, they took Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Exposition Address in 1895 to mean that 'intelligent' Negroes supported social segregation."[45] Many sources have concluded that Washington's publicly stated and nationally heard views were partially responsible for placing severe limitations on Negro progress.[46] His "policy amounted objectively to an acceptance by the Negro people of second class citizenship."[47] In their view Washington gained immediate success at the expense of long-range development.

Even though he had a great deal of influence, DuBois never attained the stature or power equal to Washington's. As a speaker, he frankly stated what he thought the conditions were that affected the Negro. Agitation for political and social rights was central to

his advocacy. In retrospect, many critics view DuBois' position, in light of the realities of the Negro's position, as wiser and potentially more fruitful.[48] He "has become the most productive source for the secular themes of the rhetoric of the black revolution."[49] Of course, one of the difficulties DuBois and the anti-Bookerites faced was that once Washington gained national power, he went to great lengths to silence his opposition.[50]

This debate suggests several important implications for the study of minority rhetoric. It would appear that if the black leader wishes to be accepted and supported by the whites his publicly stated viewpoints must carefully avoid any direct threats or demands. If, like DuBois, the black leader states his views openly, then the necessary support would not be forthcoming. Both of these leaders faced a dilemma of what rhetorical strategy to follow. Should the leader advocate a policy that would gain great support and some progress or should the leader press for equality and perhaps fail to gain support? Based on this study, it would appear that the leader advocating either approach will not obtain great progress.

For example, by carefully sidestepping the issues or bending the truth Washington rallied immense support for himself and his policies. However, his <u>publicly</u> stated opinion was mostly conciliatory in nature. The rhetorical factor is important for Washington did undertake some covert efforts at correcting the problems facing the Negro.[51] But as a national spokesman Washington has been criticized. One tentative conclusion could be that rhetorical judgments concerning

a minority speaker's effectiveness cannot be based solely on the immediate success of the speaker.

A more important conclusion might be that the gauging of rhetorical success might have to employ different standards for the black leader. Faced with a society unprepared or unwilling to accept changes, perhaps the minority leader might be viewed as a wise rhetorical strategist for not alienating the power structure. Or the leader might be viewed as wise for realizing the emasculating effects of not having power and therefore pressing for the obtainment of some fundamental progress. In either case, the basis for rhetorical criticism would have to be different from the question of personal success.

Conclusion

This study has investigated the various positions taken by two great black leaders in response to the conditions affecting the Negro in the early part of the twentieth century. Washington was willing to call for an "inch of progress over a yard of complaint," whereas DuBois was not. The immediate outcome of their speaking was to place Washington in predominant control of both the white and Negro opinion.

The implications of this study are important in any attempt to gauge the success of a black or any minority speaker in obtaining progress for himself or his people. The black leader appears to face a dilemna as to the appropriate rhetorical strategy that may require careful consideration by the critic before passing rhetorical judements.

Footnotes

[1]Charles E. Silberman, Crisis in Black and White (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), p. 125.

[2]Benjamin Quarles, The Negro in the Making of America (New York: Collier Books, 1964), pp. 167-68.

[3]C. Vann Woodward, Origins of the New South, 1877-1913 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1951), p. 356.

[4]W. E. B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folks: Essays and Sketches (Greenwick: Fawcett Publications, 1903), p. 42.

[5]John H. Bracey, Jr., August Meier, and Elliot Rudwick, (ed.), The Afro-Americans: Selected Documents (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1972), pp. 365-67; Woodward, p. 367.

[6]Silberman, p. 129.

[7]Lerone Bennett, Jr., Confrontation: Black and White (Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1966), p. 98.

[8]Lewis Killian and Charles Griff, Racial Crisis in America (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), p. 5.

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[10]John Hope Franklin, "The Two Worlds of Race: A Historical View," Daedulus, 154 (1965), p. 908.

[11]Henry Allen Bullock, A History of Negro Education in the South (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1967), p. 149.

[12]Paul H. Buck, The Road to Reunion, 1865-1900 (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1937), p. 168.

[13]August Meier, Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915 (Ann Arbor: The Univ. of Michigan Press, 1963), p. 21.

[14]Ibid., p. 19.

[15]Woodward, p. 355.

[16]Meier, p. 20-21.

[17]Booker T. Washington, Up From Slavery (New York: Bantam Books, 1901), p. 155.

[18]Washington, "How the White Man Can Best Help the Negro to a Higher Moral and Social Life," Booker T. Washington Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, "Speeches," 1907.

[19]Washington, "The Intellectuals and the Boston Mob," Negro Social and Political Thought, 1850-1920, ed. Howard Bronz (New York: Basic Books, 1966), p. 428.

[20]Woodward, p. 365.

[21]Ibid., p. 359.

[22]DuBois, Dusk at Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1940), pp. 70-71.

[23]DuBois, The Autobiography of W. E. B. DuBois (New York: International Publishers Co., Inc., 1968), pp. 236-37.

[24]DuBois, "The Training of Negroes for Social Power," W. E. B. DuBois Speaks, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: Pathfinder Press, Inc., 1970), p. 141.

[25]Ibid., p. 140.

[26]Washington, Up From Slavery, p. 156.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Washington Papers, "Speeches."

[29]DuBois, "Speech to the International Conference," W. E. B. DuBois Speaks: Speeches and Addresses 1920-1963, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), p. 32.

[30]DuBois, "The Great Migration North," W. E. B. DuBois Speaks, p. 269.

[31]DuBois, "The Conversation of Races," W. E. B. DuBois Speaks, p. 79.

[32]E. D. Washington, Selected Speeches of Booker T. Washington (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1932), p. 57.

[33]Washington, Up From Slavery, p. 158.

[34]DuBois, "Interracial Conference," p. 32.

[35]DuBois, "The Training of Negroes for Social Power," p. 138.

[36]Washington Papers, "Speeches."

[37]Woodward, p. 359.

[38]Washington Papers, "Speeches."

[39]DuBois, "Interracial Conference," p. 52.

[40]Ibid., p. 65.

[41]Washington Papers, "Speeches."

[42]Edwin S. Redky, Black Exodus: Black Nationalism and Back-to-Africa Movements, 1890-1910 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1969), p. 4.

[43]Silberman, p. 125.

[44]Ibid.

[45]I. A. Newby, Jim Crow's Defense: Anti-Negro Thought in America, 1900-1903 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 127-28.

[46]See, for example: Woodward, p. 367; Silberman, p. 125, Bennett, p. 91.

[47]Herbert Aptheker (ed.), A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States: From the Reconstruction Era to 1910 (New York: The Citadel Press, 1951), p. 876.

[48]Silberman, p. 131; Bennett, p. 97.

[49]Arthur L. Smith, Rhetoric of the Black Revolution, (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1969), p. 47.

[50]Meier, 115-116; Francis L. Broderick, W. E. B. DuBois: Negro Leader in a Time of Crisis (Palo Alto: Stanford Univ. Press, 1959), p. 62 ff.

[51]August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, From Plantation to Ghetto (New York: Hillard Wang, 1970), pp. 204-05.